Serving in the Indian Diaspora: The Transnational Domestic Servant in Contemporary Women's Fiction

Indian diasporic women writers in their works of fiction often bring to the fore the feelings of fragmentation and alienation experienced by middle-class female immigrants in advanced capitalist countries. Among the many texts grappling with these themes are Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music*, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and Suneeta Peres da Costa's *Homework.* Such representations of the cultural and racial Othering encountered by first-generation Indian women in the diaspora have received considered attention in postcolonial literary studies.-However, significantly less critical attention has been paid to the importance of class identities in shaping diasporic lives, especially when the female immigrant is employed as a live-in domestic worker and caregiver.

Through the prism of three works of fiction, my paper engages with the figure of the female immigrant from India working as a domestic servant in the US and Australia. The literary texts under consideration are the novel *Jasmine* (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee and two short stories— "A Pocket Full of Stories" (2009) by Sujhata Fernandes and "Almost Valentine's Day" (2014) by Mridula Koshy. The publication of these texts coincides with a 'resurgence of domestic service' in advanced capitalist countries from the late twentieth century onwards (Haskins and Lowrie 2015, 9).

Mukherjee's novel features white American employers; while in the two short stories the employers, like the maid, are Indian. The texts under discussion provide us with three, often strikingly, divergent constructions of transnational domestic servitude. This essay seeks to demonstrate the ways in which these literary representations of transnational domestic labour complicate prevailing interpretations of the Indian diasporic experience (which tend to privilege gender and race as identity markers) and invite us to engage with the intricate intersection of race, class and gendered identities. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, with their contrasting ideological underpinnings, the three narratives examined in this article compel us

not only to revisit the myth and reality of upward social mobility, but also to reconceptualise the meaning of integration and exclusion in a transnational context.

Mukherjee's novel has been described as 'a *Bildungsroman* of female migration' (Vijayasree 2000:128, italics in the original). The eponymous character is an illegal immigrant whose initial months in the US are fraught with insecurity and violence. Jasmine is, raped upon arrival, but eventually becomes absorbed into white middle class American society. This essay is concerned with Mukherjee's depiction of Jasmine's stint as a live-in nanny in the home of a young white couple in Manhattan, which has not been addressed in depth in the substantial existing scholarship on the novel. Unlike Jasmine, both Nandini in "A Pocket Full of Stories" and Aruna in "Almost Valentine's Day" are 'imported', to Australia and the US respectively, by Indian families who are settled there and who covered their travel expenses and paid for either all or part of their visa costs. But, as we will see below, Nandini and Aruna have considerably different experiences as transnational domestic workers as well as dramatically disparate perceptions of their own status as servants.

Unlike other forms of transnational employment, domestic service, as Helma Lutz explains, cannot be examined in terms of migration theories that are underpinned by the "rationale of a global push-pull model in which demand in one part of the world leads to supply from less developed areas" (2014, 1-2). The particularity of this form of transnational labour stems from the "special relationship between employer and employee which is highly emotional, personalized and characterized by mutual dependency" (ibid.). Moreover, domestic service in the advanced capitalist world is both gendered and racialized. After the abolition of slavery, replacing white Americans and European women, African Americans "began to enter domestic service, which eventually became 'black women's work' as the numbers of immigrants declined (Ray and Qayum 2010, 169). In the years following the implementation of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, most US domestic workers became immigrant women of colour (ibid). If, during the White Australia policy days, "coercive systems closely regulated by the state" (Higman 2002, 70) forced many Aboriginal women to work as domestic servants for white women, it appears that in contemporary

Australia too, "the live-in, indentured or bonded domestic worker is typically a 'foreign worker' rather than a 'native'" (Haskins 2009, 106). The female servant in all three of the works examined in this essay is a young woman from India possessing very "low human capital", specifically "little education, little or no English, and nontransferable professional skills" (Banerjee 2013, 98). Ethnographic studies on transnational domestic servitude tend to focus on white employers and, as Ray and Qayum (2010, 168) point out, "employers who are of colour rarely figure in the academic and popular literature on US domestic servitude". The two short stories, however, do feature diasporic Indian employers and invite us to ponder not only the intersection of race, gender and class but also the workings of what can perhaps be described as a private, ethnic labour market. As Pallavi Banerjee explains (2013, 98), "ethnic enclaves and labour markets are parallel economic systems, often based on informal market interactions […] which provide employment opportunities for co-ethnics". The most well-known incident in recent times which brought the co-ethnic transnational domestic servitude issue to light concerned a female Indian diplomat's maid Sangeeta who exposed her mistress Khobragade for refusing to pay her the minimum wage in the US and denied her access to her own passport which would allow her to return home to India[1].

Democratic Domestic Servitude?

Mukherjee's portrayal of Jasmine's experience as a live-in caregiver is overwhelmingly positive. Domestic service is effectively shown to rescue Jasmine from a suffocating existence in the neighbourhood of Flushing where she had been living with an Indian professor and his wife, and had felt "immured" in an ethnic ghetto (Mukherjee 2001 [1989], 148). Working for Taylor (a physics professor) and his wife Wylie (a book editor) allows Jasmine to rub shoulders with the cultural elites of Manhattan. She is shown to flourish intellectually and becomes a de facto member of the class that she is hired to serve: "Even though I was just an *au pair*, professors would ask if I could help them with Sanskrit or Arabic, Devanagari or Gurumukhi script […] They were very democratic that way" (Mukherjee 2001 [1989], 33). The text does not problematize the homogenizing attitudes of

the academics that Jasmine encounters when they attribute to her a pan-oriental identity and assume her to be a specialist of "oriental" languages as divergent as Sanskrit and Arabic. Instead, this is presented as proof of a quintessential, democratic *Americanness*. Domestic service, then, becomes a touchstone for the realization of Jasmine's gendered and class emancipation and is woven in with the narrative's subscription to a "nationalist model of assimilation" (Reddy 2013, 339). From being a nanny, Jasmine almost seamlessly slips into a administrative job at Columbia University, which entails answering phones in the Mathematics Department and later, tutoring graduate students in Punjabi in the Indian Languages Department. It is worth noting that the text glosses over the very serious implications of Jasmine's forged Green card and passport, particularly given the historical context of the novel. *Jasmine* was published in the wake of the large-scale immigration reform laws of 1986 that "levied fines against employers for hiring illegal immigrants and supposedly redressed the 'open door' Asian immigration policy of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965" (Reddy 2013, 339). The portrayal of the relative ease with which Jasmine is shown to become absorbed in mainstream America ultimately presents the country as "a racial democracy" and participates in "the erasure of historical racial inequalities in the nation" (ibid.). It also underestimates the presence of class inequalities and the limitations of class mobility in the US, as discussed below.

Jasmine's employers are portrayed as being deeply sensitive to and critical of the racially defined practice of domestic service in the US, with its "ancient" custom of "dark-skinned mammies" but, paradoxically, this too is constructed in terms of positive stereotypes: "'You're probably tired of Americans assuming that if you're from India or China or the Caribbean you must be good with children'" (Mukherjee 2001 [1989], 168). This oblique "criticism" of racialized domestic service arguably suggests that, though subjected to stereotypes, women of Indian, Chinese and Caribbean origin are nonetheless valued by their white American employers for their supposedly innate talent for taking care of children,. Furthermore, it neglects to take into account other, much more damaging labels attributed to women of colour who work as caregivers, ;for instance, black nannies in the country are

often "labelled as 'lazy' and 'bench-sitters'"(Burke 2016, 83).

Tickell (2015, 152) has explained that the main differences between domestic employment practices in the global North and in India have to do with "the ready availability and cost of domestic labour, with a much more established culture of employing domestic workers existing across the middle class in the subcontinent". However, a striking similarity between domestic service in the US and the 'culture of servitude'[1] in India, where 'social relations of domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres' (Ray and Qayum 2009, 3), is that this kind of labour is stigmatized in both societies (see Romero 2013) . Paradoxically, if Mukherjee's novel minimizes the inequalities inherent in domestic service in the US, the text stresses upon Jasmine's uniqueness, notably her dark and exotic beauty which sets her apart from other destitute women and signals that she is destined to escape this profession which, it is also implied, is too lowly for her: "'Jazzy, you don't strike me as a picker or a domestic […] You're different from these others'" (Mukherjee 2001 [1989] 134). Jasmine's upward mobility stems essentially from what Susan Koshy has described as her "sexual capital": she comes to replace both Taylor's wife and the wife of Bud, an older man in Iowa who ends his decades-old marriage for her (2004, 64). Following a shooting attack that leaves Bud paralyzed, Jasmine effectively becomes his full-time caregiver, a role that is deeply sexualized in a way that accentuates her erotic prowess and Bud's impotence. Jasmine's sexual triumph when positioned as a caregiver in the text neglects to recognize how the sexualization of caregiving as a profession can exacerbate "the already vulnerable position" of immigrant women in low-wage jobs (Fisher and Kang 2013, 171). The sexualized immigrant servant in *Jasmine* is arguably presented as a member of what Koshy has called "*the sexual model minority*" (2004, 135; emphasis in the original). This underscores the tensions in the narrative between its desire to advance multicultural assimilation and upward social mobility as a feature of American society and its need to highlight Jasmine's beauty

which sets her apart from other destitute immigrants who "live in ethnic ghettos and seem dissatisfied with their immigrant lot" (ibid,158).

Jasmine sums up her years as a domestic worker in the following words: "'I was family, and I was a professional'" (Mukherjee 2001 [1989], 175). Pierre Bourdieu (1976, 127) has argued that concealment and recourse to euphemisms are essential to maintaining the most "elementary" forms of domination such as the master–servant relationship. Jasmine is unable to recognize the fact that referring to domestic help as part of the family is meant to 'camouflage a disturbing reality' and render 'a profoundly unequal relationship relatively tolerable', not only for the mistress, but also for the maid (Mirza 2016, 36). By insisting on Jasmine's role as a professional but also as a family member, Mukherjee's novel effectively elides "the precise element" which makes domestic labour "profoundly exploitative", that is the very "personal" nature of the relationship between employer and employee (Rollins 1985, 156). The narrative also downplays the fact that ultimately membership of this family rests on the breakup of the familial unit as it existed prior to Jasmine's arrival and necessitates the departure of Taylor's wife Wylie. Fissures appear in the relationship between the two women when, for instance, one morning Jasmine's young charge refers to her as "Mommy" in front of Wylie. As Pei-Chia Lan points out:

> [M]others who hire childcare workers face an emotional dilemma: they want nannies to love their children so they can mitigate their anxieties about leaving their children with others, yet they feel uneasy if the children develop strong attachments to nannies or even confuse nannies for mothers (2006, 113).

But in the novel, Wylie is shown to surmount her feelings of jealously and concern for the child becoming confused about parental figures with surprising alacrity, and that very evening she resigns herself to sharing her only adopted child with Jasmine. She dismisses her earlier reaction in the following words: "'We're family, in a family don't sisters sometimes fight?'" (Mukherjee 2001 [1989], 178). In insisting on the 'familial' character of domestic service, the novel simplifies the many paradoxes and contradictions inherent in paid full-time childcare and elides how these tensions can further complicate the immigrant's assimilation not only in

the family employing her but also in the 'host' nation.

Rather than as a study of false consciousness, Jasmine's insistence on perceiving domestic servitude not only as a familial but also as a democratic institution needs to be considered in the context of the novel's representation of the American Dream:

> I fell in love with what he represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking, even when she didn't understand it. It seemed entirely American [...] I was a professional, like a schoolteacher or a nurse. I wasn't a maidservant. (Mukherjee 2001 [1989], 148-155)

The idea(l) of the American Dream rests on the "concept of class fluidity" even though studies have repeatedly shown upward mobility in the US to be a myth (Samuel 2012, 7). More specifically, Jasmine's observation belies the fact that, while for some white women in the US "domestic service was simply a stage of life or a bridge to better opportunities […] for black and Asian, for Mexican and immigrant women who were neither Anglo-Saxon nor English-speaking, domestic service was a trap— a situation of being dominated from which they could not rise and which they had to pass on to their daughters" (Romero 2016, 105). Therefore, while it is true that, where white women hire other white women to work for them, their relationship can be conceptualized as an extension of "community patterns of mutual aid", this is clearly not the case for women of colour (ibid.). In criticizing Mukherjee's depiction of domestic service, I do not wish to imply that caring and benevolent employers do not exist. But what I find particularly problematic about her characterization of Wylie and Taylor is that they are not shown to be *exceptionally* kind, democratic and generous employers, and are instead presented as being typical of upper- middle-class Americans in general who all seem to be models of racial equality. For instance, the employer of another nanny Letitia "travelled all the way to Paraguay to adopt a baby" (Mukherjee 2001 [1989], 179). Furthermore, the only other nannies that Jasmine encounters, "Letitia from Trinidad, and Jamaica from Barbados", are portrayed as being difficult women who are unnecessarily antagonistic towards their employers, with the former being described as a "grumbler" and the latter as a "snob" who has a "haughty British voice" (Mukherjee 2001 [1989], 178-179).

In contrast to her magnanimous and open-minded employer, and unlike Jasmine, Laetitia's character is constructed as bigoted and lacking in a progressive attitude since she bemoans having to work as a maid: "Her mummy and daddy'd die if they found out she was cleaning up dirt, especially white folks' dirt, in America' (ibid.).

Such a portrayal vastly overestimates the egalitarian and democratic tenor of servant-employer relationships in the US. It downplays the plight of immigrant live-in domestic workers, who alongside working under difficult conditions which entail "low wages, long hours, lack of privacy and benefits", often have to face other forms of abuse, such as "passport confiscation", "torture" and "rape", which in contrast, Fernandes addresses in her short story (Romero 2013, 194).

Domestic Servitude and Exploitation

Fernandes' depiction of transnational domestic servitude in "A Pocket Full of Stories" is much darker than Mukherjee's While employed by a middle-class family of Indian immigrants in Sydney the maid Nandini experiences exploitation and sexual violence and the text suggests that working as a domestic servant severely hampers, rather than facilitates, the integration of the foreign female worker in the host country.

The child narrator Lily explains the reasons behind Nandini's presence in Sydney in the following words: "But what a scandal my mother, the oldest daughter of the Sequiera family, should be having her second child and no domestic help in the house" (Fernandes 2009, 187). Domestic help in India is the hallmark of bourgeois identity and "is still intrinsic to the comfort and status of middle-class families" (Tickell 2015, 153). The narrator's family (and Nandini's employers), then, replicate the same class expectations as those prevalent in India to establish their bourgeois credentials in the diaspora. Nandini's servitude appears to become heightened because of its transnational context, as she becomes a means for the Indian family to create an authentic "Indianness" in the diaspora constructed not only in terms of expectations regarding food and cleanliness but also with respect to the "necessary" presence of servants in bourgeois Indian homes-As Srinivas points out, "Indian women, in the diasporic

context, are usually expected both by their families and by themselves, to run the household whether they work outside the home or not" (2012, 361). To cater to Indian women in the "new world" in their quest to recreate time-consuming and complex authentic Indian dishes without the customary "retinue of servants", a range of convenience food products (such as Patak curry pastes[2]) emerged globally, and on which Nandini's employers seem to have relied quite happily until her arrival (Melwani 2003, np). But now, the women of the family suddenly see these products as having lost their utility, and indeed their credibility, as they are determined to extract the maximum labour from Nandini:

> She was adamant that we had to grind our own masalas, because God knows what-all rubbish they put in those Patak curry pastes. She made Nandini scrub the floors twice and wash all the clothes by hand because what is the point of wasting electricity on washing machines when there is a servant in the house (Fernandes 2009, 189).

The action of the short story takes place almost entirely in the domestic sphere and has the powerful effect of underscoring the extent to which Nandini's life is restricted: her days are spent primarily in her employers' two bedroom apartment in a seaside suburb and her exposure to "outside" Australia is limited to Sydney International Airport and the beach nearby where she takes Lily for walks. At no point during her stay in Australia does she have the opportunity to interact with anyone other than Lily's family. Nandini sleeps on the floor in the children's bedroom and her condition echoes that of a typical sub-continental ayah who, as Ambreen Hai explains, is "a drudge—poor, illiterate, homeless […] and vulnerable to all forms of abuse […] she would sleep on the floor in the children's room, attend to all their needs, be clothed in cast-offs, and have little time of her own" (2000, 420). Nandini has no privacy and is denied the reprieve that a spatial divide between home and workplace could offer. , Fernandes' story suggests that the culture of servitude and its values, that are so deeply ingrained in Indian society,-almost intact to Australia and become reinforced by the journey (Ray and Qayum 2009, 167).

[2] This food brand was founded by a Gujarati-British entrepreneur (Melwani 2003, n.p.).

Nandini's only ally in the house is Lily, a child, who has little understanding of the events as they unfold in particular when Nandini is raped by her employer's brother-in-law and becomes pregnant. This pregnancy is taken by the family as proof of her innate licentiousness and she is branded a "good-for-nothing slut". And they use this to justify their decision to send her back to India without any form of assistance (Fernandes 2009, 190). Sexual licentiousness is often construed as an attribute of servants across a variety of cultures: Delap has drawn our attention to the "close relationship between domestic servants and sex" which is apparent in the fact that "the sexual insult 'slut' was seventeenth-century shorthand for slattern or kitchen maid" in Britain (2011, 174). In her study of Bengali literature produced during colonial times, Swapna Banerjee reveals that middle-class authors used their writings to construct a clear distinction between the sexuality of bourgeois women and servant sexuality: "Depiction of loose morals in maids and their pronounced eroticism and sexual aggressiveness helped the Bengali middle-class to define in opposition to them, the 'respectable' (bhadra) identity of women of their own class" (2004, 182). The conviction that Nandini's supposedly intrinsic loose morals stem from her class identity allows the bourgeois employers (both male and female) to morally extricate themselves from her pregnancy and the events preceding it. The employers also use Nandini's appearance to create a *racialized* class identity for the maid in opposition to their own: she is described as a "small, skinny black girl" (Fernandes 2009, 188). In South Asia, as Amali Philips explains, 'thinness and dark skin are the most tangible physical expression of suffering and rejection and are also associated with the impoverished poor classes who have poor diets and toil in the long hot sun" (2004, 355). This racist attitude too has travelled intact, and though the short story does not shed light on the interplay between "Indian" racism and the racism to which Indians and Aboriginals are subjected in Australia, it does complicate any narrative which would seek to cast Indians immigrants as mere victims of racial discrimination in the advanced capitalist world.

Nandini does not dare to name her rapist and it is telling that the adults never audibly consider it as a possibility that the man who impregnated her may be one of their own. This

wilful ignorance conveniently allows them to maintain a sanitized perception of their own morality. Even before her arrival in Australia, Nandini is described as "a bit shady" by the narrator's grandmother, an observation which is followed by the rhetorical question: "[…] but what to do?" (Fernandes 2009, 187). The carefully constructed bourgeois resignation implied in this question underscores the belief that servant girls are by definition "a bit shady". Like Lenny in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man*, the child narrator in "A Pocket Full of Stories" frequently defies "the divisions that adults are wont to draw" but she has nonetheless already been partially socialized into her class roles and does not challenge the classist logic underpinning her grandmother's comments (Stoler 2002, 119). In addition to this class-bound logic which allows the family to cast Nandini as the sinner, the immense geographical distance between Australia and India makes it even easier for the employers to disassociate themselves from the maid's plight. Lily's mother explains Nandini's dismissal in the following words: "Lily darling […] Nandini has to go back to India because she has been very bad. She did things that nice girls do not do" (Fernandes 2009, 187).

The sexual exploitation of lower-class women by upper-middle class males, and the denigration of the sexuality of female workers by elite women are themes that can be found in a number of contemporary Anglophone novels set in India, including Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Brinda Charry's *The Hottest Day of the Year* (2001) and Thrity Umrigar's *The Space between Us* (2005). In a novel like *The Hottest Day of the Year*, the revelation that the Brahmin employer impregnated his maid leads to his loss of face within his community in a small town in Tamil Nadu. However the transnational context of "A Pocket Full of Stories" appears to remove any societal pressures and allows the employers to distance themselves more easily from the maid's plight.[3]

Escaping Domestic Servitude

[3] One is reminded also of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma's fears in *The God of Small Things* that Chacko's affairs with lower-class women would result in an illicit pregnancy, and lead to demands to legitimize the sexual relationship: "They only worried about the Naxalites, who had been known to force men from Good Families to marry servant girls whom they had made pregnant" (256).

Koshy's "Almost Valentine's Day", presents an interesting counterpoint to the other two works of fiction examined in this article: it neither subscribes to a rosy image of domestic service nor presents the transnational maid as an essentially helpless victim of class, race and patriarchal power. As we saw, Jasmine is shown to effortlessly move out of domestic servitude, which is part of the novel's construction of the US as a land of endless opportunities. Nandini in "A Pocketful of Stories" appears to be unable to imagine any such escape. While living in Sydney, she resorts to telling fantastical stories which are meant to entertain her young charge as well as to give herself some respite from the drudgery of her job:

> Her world of fantasy seemed a place where we were limited only by our imaginations where there were no adults to say what was right and wrong. It was a place where magic happened […] it was a world where skinny black girls were princesses and doctors, and were beautiful and loved" (Fernandes 2009, 188).

Nandini is described by the narrator as being "so quiet that we kept forgetting she was there" (Fernandes 2009, 187). The depiction of Nandini's passivity and her plight can perhaps be seen to stem from the same "didactic intentions" that Swapna Banerjee has noted in Rabindranath Tagore's work (Mirza 2016, 39):

> The purpose of making servants into markers of loyalty, submissiveness, and sacrifice was to awaken the consciousness of their employers. The writings were not so much about domestics as they were about the middle-class employers themselves. By deliberately capturing the suffering of a subordinated class, the actual effort was to amend the wrongs that the dominant class perpetrated on the subalterns. (Banerjee 2004, 149)

Like Nandini, Aruna in "Almost Valentine's Day" is also employed by an Indian immigrant family. But she clearly does not subscribe to the *namak halal*[2] model of servitude and is determined to escape her servant status. It is only fitting then, that though narrated in the third-person, the short story is firmly focused on Aruna's consciousness. While she does not resort to brutal violence against her employers like the chauffeur Balram in Aravind Adiga's

novel *The White Tiger* (2008), Aruna is more than capable of deception, manipulation and blackmail. However, despite her feistiness, the reader never forgets that Aruna and her mother are destitute, and have been so all their lives. A poignant reminder of her poverty is the recurring image of her broken shoe that she tries in vain to repair.

Aruna is a complex character, ignorant in some matters and worldly in others. By making us privy to her thoughts, Koshy sheds light on the perils that often accompany female domestic service. Aruna is all too aware, for instance, of the widespread sexual abuse of female domestic staff by male employers: "The slightest creak of the house conjured images of Uncle slipping out of his bed and coming to her. These things happened, didn't they?" (Koshy 2014, 26). If, like Nandini, Aruna's passage to the advanced capitalist country has been organized and sponsored by her transnational Indian employers, a few paragraphs into the short story the reader realizes that this journey was not one to which she submitted passively. Instead, it was part of a plan that Aruna devised with her mother to make a life for herself that clearly does not involve working as a servant, whether for an Indian family or a white American one. She is resolved to play the role of the inefficient and insolent servant so that her employers would willingly release her of her bond. For instance, instead of carrying out the expected household chores, Aruna actively *creates* work for her employers by leaving her dirty dishes in the sink. She also seeks to provoke them by nonchalantly putting her feet up on the coffee table while her mistress attempts to give her instructions. That Aruna is sitting (with her feet up) while her mistress is standing, is not a neutral event: the "politics of sitting" in India are at the heart of servant-employer relationships and embody "hierarchy, inequality and subordination/domination" (Ray and Qayum 2009, 149). Aruna is fully aware of how offensive and defiant her actions must appear to her employers. We see also her playing with the "familial discourse" to her advantage. As discussed above, the use of familial titles is often necessary for the smooth functioning of the servant-employer relationship. Meera, however, explicitly instructs Aruna to not refer to her as "Aunty" but as "Mary": Meera's rejection of the "one of the family" discourse as well as her adoption of an "American" name hints at her desire not to be seen as part of an "ethnic enclave", which

could throw into doubt her own narrative of integration within American society. Aruna is quick to read the impulse underpinning this desire and, when addressing her mistress, she deploys the title of "Aunty" not to ingratiate herself or to alleviate her servant status but to provoke irritation and as yet another display of defiance: "Aruna, who was practised at inflecting her 'Aunty's' with something not-respectful, mouthed the word to herself, 'Aunty'" (Koshy 2014, 28).

Unlike Nandini's employers, the mistress Meera in "Almost Valentine's Day" consciously distances herself from certain discriminatory attitudes towards domestic help prevalent in India, notably the idea that servants are "contaminated" and unfit to be touched. In fact, when Meera meets Aruna at the airport, she embraces her by way of greeting. Aruna is surprised by this physical contact and realizes that the transnational setting has shifted some of the boundaries characterizing the servant-employer relationship: "[S]hockingly, the woman had reached her arms around Aruna. Yes, Aruna thought, this is America. But this was a conclusion not without puzzlement" (Koshy 2014, 28-29). Without insisting that domestic service is a democratic profession in the US as Mukherjee's novel appears to do, Koshy's text reveals how it might be a less discriminatory practice than the culture of servitude in the Indian subcontinent which "mimics prescriptions in orthodox Hinduism which are dictated by a profound anxiety about the ritual pollution of the upper castes by the lower castes' (Mirza 2016, 35; see also Ray and Qayum 2009, 153). Employers often shun physical contact with the servants and set aside a separate set of cutlery and crockery for them to use. Both Meera and Aruna are aware also of the American "narrative of fairness and rights", particularly with respect to legal requirements regarding minimum wage, even when the employer-employee relationship remains a deeply unequal one[34]. While in all probability not paying her the minimum wage, Meera is shown to be a considerate employer, who expresses concern for Aruna's well being: "No need to start right away. Rest till you adjust to the time difference […] it's not possible to take everything in at once" (Koshy 2014, 27-29). In sharp contrast to

Nandini's mistress who sees her as a *replacement* for the modern appliances that she herself uses to carry out household chores, Meera offers to teach Aruna how to use the dishwasher.

The employers initially tolerate Aruna's defiant behaviour, but the master eventually resorts to violence which, it is implied in the narrative, Aruna has sought to provoke: "Uncle swooped from across the room and [took] her by the upper arm […] Aruna's arm felt wrenched from its socket. A part of her was elated" (Koshy 2016, 41). Unable to deal with her lack of submission, they resolve to "return her" (ibid.). The use of this expression suggests that despite Meera's desire to be more egalitarian, much like Nandini's employers who decide that they will "have to send her back", Meera does see Aruna as a commodity that can be acquired and then returned if deemed unsuitable (Fernandes 2009, 190). Aruna, however, has no intention of complying: "I won't get on the plane. You'll see I won't get on the plane. They'll find out how you brought me here" (Koshy 2016, 41). She is, of course, referring to the American authorities: Aruna knows that her employers have brought her over to the US under false pretences and risk facing prosecution for visa fraud.

Aruna is a striking figure for she is driven by "her own stubborn interests - above all self interest"[4] and Koshy's short story exhibits a clear "refusal to sentimentalize the subaltern" (Tickell 2015, 157). To secure her freedom from domestic service, Aruna not only resorts to blackmail, but she also disregards the sacrifices (monetary and otherwise) that her mother made for her. Faced with her threats, Aruna's employers secure her a job at a factory. But if freedom for Jasmine is constructed so as to echo the representation of America as an inclusive multicultural nation, Aruna does not make such an association. She perceives her emancipation as a personal victory rather than a realization of the American Dream, resolutely positioning herself "outside the mainstream narrative of the poor and huddled masses looking to the United States for their salvation"[5]

The three texts examined compel us to confront a figure that does not often feature in the literature of the Indian diaspora: a lower-class female immigrant of colour. As a servant, she is at the bottom of "the hierarchy of paid employment", even if the novel *Jasmine* rather unconvincingly seeks to cast domestic service as a profession that is conducive to upward

mobility in the United States (Parreñas 1998, 374). Without underestimating the significance or the seriousness of the sense of alienation experienced by middle-class South Asian women in the diaspora, we can arguably define the transnational female servant as a sort of "Other of the Other" (Zizek 1996, 136) who complicates the all-encompassing category of "Third World" female immigrants in Australia and the US, and underscores the complex intersection of class, race and gender hierarchies in diasporic lives. This holds especially true for the two short stories, where the employers are also immigrants of colour so that the Us/Them binary is very clearly drawn along transnational gendered and class lines, rather than merely in terms of race or ethnicity. The presence of the co-ethnic transnational servant is intimately tied in with the perpetuation and reinforcement of a bourgeois Indian identity in the diaspora, even when the diasporic employers may wish to assimilate in the host country and to ostensibly align themselves with public discourses of equality and fairness (however hollow or problematic they might be) in the global North.

Endnotes

1. For a more in-depth discussion of the Sangeeta-Khobragade incident, see Tickell (2015, 150-151).

2. The term *Namak Halal* (Urdu/Hindi), literally meaning 'true to one's master's salt', evokes what are socially constructed as positive attributes of submissiveness and gratitude towards one's 'betters'.

3. Mridula Koshy, personal email to author (1 May 2016).

4. Mridula Koshy, personal email to author (1 May 2016).

5. Mridula Koshy, personal email to author (1 May 2016).

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